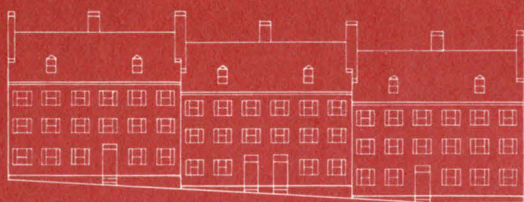


Picture It: Lowell Goes to the Movies

An Exhibit on Lowell's Movie Theaters,
Movie Stars and Movie Locations
by Nancye Tuttle

PATRICK J. MOGAN
CULTURAL CENTER



Working People Exhibit

September 16 through December 4, 1993

Tuesday - Saturday, 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

40 French Street, Lowell, Massachusetts

Movie Houses on the Merrimack

From the 1920s to the 1960s, downtown Lowell was a major entertainment mecca in the Merrimack Valley, and movies were what people flocked here to see.

The Strand, the Merrimack Square and RKO Keith featured first run films and fans stood in line for hours to catch the current blockbuster. At second and third run movie houses like the Rialto, the Royal, the Crown, the Capitol, the Victory (later, the Tower/LGM Memorial/Palace), and the State (the Opera House/Gates), they saw B-movies, serials, cowboys, comics and their favorite movie stars the second and third time around.

Lowell was caught in an entertainment frenzy even before these legendary theaters attracted crowds. That happened here, as it did all over the nation when Thomas Edison invented motion pictures in 1892. His half-minute kinetoscopes featured Vaudeville players, circus stars, animal acts and Wild West celebrities like Buffalo Bill Cody and Annie Oakley. They were shown in kinetoscope parlors which sprang up around the country after the first one opened in 1894 in New York City. People paid 25 cents, later only a nickel, to peer at five Edison shows through special viewers. Lowell's early movie palaces included one called the Edisonia. Others were the Parlor Theatre and the Bijou/Gaiety/Boston. All showed kinetoscopes in the 1890s.



Bette Davis (left) age 9, visiting Lowell with her sister, Bobby

Motion picture venues changed within a few years when entrepreneurs realized that they could put a crowd into a hall, project motion pictures onto a screen and charge money. It was the Lumiere brothers from Lyons, France, rather than Edison, who fostered this advance when they invented a machine which was a predecessor of today's projector. On December 28, 1895, the Lumieres first projected ten short motion pictures onto a screen to a crowd at Paris' Grand Cafe. They brought their show to the United States in 1897 and soon rivaled Edison with demonstrations in many cities. Edison caught on, abandoning his kinetoscope shows for public presentations in theaters. Popular entertainment was forever changed, thanks to these movie pioneers.

Lowell's Legendary Theaters

Forty movie theaters existed in Lowell over the years. Early names were exotic: La Scala, Voyons, Funny Land, Alhambra, and Jewel. Theaters remained in the same locations but names changed with ownership.

Movie going was a grand event and escape for working people, made more special when some latest hit was featured.

"I had a standing 'date' with my dad when the newest musicals came to town starring Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Alice Faye and Eleanor Powell and played in Lowell's first run houses," said Lowell native and movie fan, Dolores Dion, looking back to the 1930s.

Movies provided the best babysitter in town on weekends. Kids headed to second and third run flicks at the Rialto, Royal, Crown and Capitol, taking the bus for a nickel downtown and back, and getting in to see a movie for a nickel, dime or quarter.

"We saw Westerns at the Royal - Tim McCoy, Buck Jones, Tom Mix and Ken Maynard. There were Frankenstein movies and gangster films and the animal trainer, Clyde Beatty. We got in for a dime," said Lowellian Charles Tsapatsaris, who organized efforts to save the Strand in the early 1970s.

Eventually, Lowell's theaters fell victim to television, automobiles, shopping mall cinemas and urban renewal. Here's what happened to Lowell's legendary theaters:

- * The Strand, located on Central Street where Lowell Academy of Hair Design now stands, was a local showcase and famous for its lavish lobby. It opened amid splendor on October 1, 1917, to a twenty-six piece orchestra. It stopped showing films in 1968 and, despite efforts by preservationists and the Save Our Strand Campaign, was torn down in 1974.
- * The RKO Keith on Bridge Street, where Petren Building and the parking lot are located today, operated from 1911 through 1963. First called B. F. Keith's, this was a regular stop on the Vaudeville circuit. Keith's featured three shows a day, including a silent movie and pit orchestra. When Vaudeville faded, shows changed to movies that starred "names" on the circuit. Keith's closed in 1963 and remained empty until August of 1975, when the City foreclosed on it for back taxes. Petren purchased it in 1976 and razed it for parking.



Strand Theatre, 1933

- * The Merrimack Square on Paige Street stood where John Street Garage is presently. A converted corporation boarding house, this was a movie palace from 1909-1952 and had a lobby of Spanish decor. Owned by several companies, it ended as a Paramount property. The City took the theater by eminent domain to demolish it for parking in December of 1953.
- * The Rialto on Central Street was the original Boston and Maine Railroad terminal and still stands, although its marquee was removed in 1987. It housed the Owl Theater before the Rialto reigned from 1920 to 1960. Norman Glassman purchased it in 1930 and ran successful second-run films along with crowd-drawing Gift Nights. He converted the Rialto into a bowling alley in 1960 after opening the Lowell Drive-In on Pawtucket Boulevard.
Norman Glassman also operated the Capitol at 376 Middlesex Street from 1926 to 1959. The City took this by eminent domain in order to construct the Lord Overpass over Thorndike Street.
- * The Crown on Middlesex Street operated from 1916 until 1949 and featured second and third run films. Its marquee remains today over an electrical store on the site.
- * The Royal, owned by the Sokolowski family, was in operation on Merrimack Street from 1926 to 1959 and was also popular for second and third run films. A portion of that theater remains today behind a storefront.
- * The State, on back Central Street, was originally the Lowell Opera House and later, the Gates. Constructed in 1887, it was even more beautiful than the Strand, according to Arthur Keenan and Alfred Burke. In its final days, stage plays were also presented here. It was torn down in 1956, a victim of urban renewal.
- * The Victory/Tower/LGM Memorial/Palace was open from 1926 to 1951 on East Merrimack Street. It was owned by Norman Glassman and, for some of that period, was managed by Mr. Sokolowski. The theater's marquee remains today over the vacant former showroom of Gervais Buick.

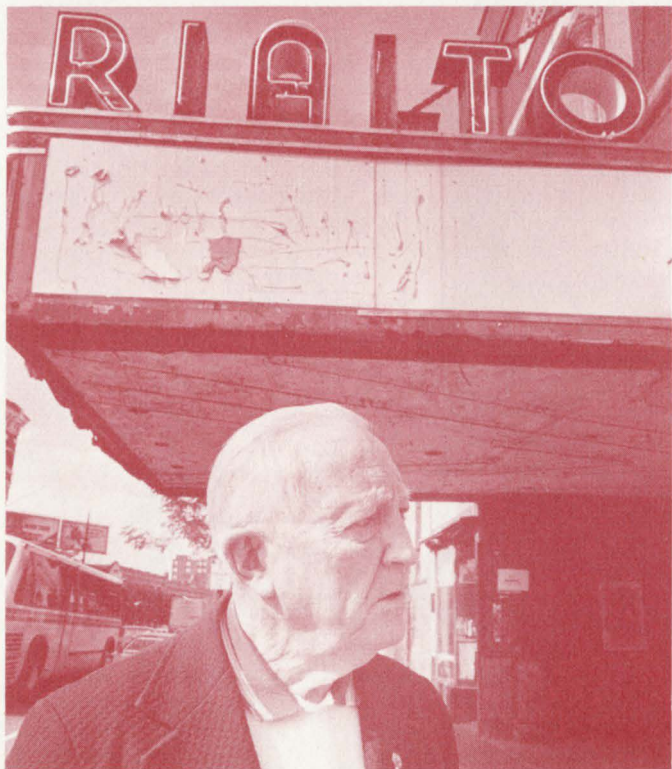
Behind the Scenes

Many people worked in Lowell's theaters as managers, projectionists, ushers and ticket-takers. Managers were well respected men who loved their jobs and had a flair for showmanship. Two names stand out: Arthur Keenan and the late Nat Silver.

"We were it. It was a front house operation. I greeted the people in the lobby. We had ushers in every aisle who wore white gloves. I inspected them. We were busy, but well-paid. I loved the business," said Keenan, who was Strand's manager from 1930 to 1935 and 1946 to 1972 and the Merrimack Square manager from 1935 to 1946. One former Strand usher, Bob O'Connor, now an officer at Shawmut Bank, recalls Keenan:

"Arthur Keenan was a strict disciplinarian. Our uniforms had to be impeccable. We had to stand with our backs to the screen at all times. As life went on, I realized some of the values that he passed on. He did a fine job."

Nat Silver is also remembered as a task master. He brought movie stars to the Strand during World War II for war bond promotions. Pictures included in this Exhibit show him with personalities like Broderick Crawford, Jackie Cooper, Caesar Romero, Nelson Eddy, Troy Hayden, Denise Darcell, and Jayne Mansfield.



Long-time Lowell theater manager, Arthur Keenan, in front of the *Rialto*, 1987

Selling the Show

The managers competed with promotions designed to bring crowds in and keep them coming back.

"I tried to be a master of exploitation, drawing up my own promotions. We had cowboys on the sidewalks trying to bring people in," said Keenan. Other promotions included Rialto dish days, Lucky Boy and Girl contests, scrap metal drives, broadcasts of Tom Clayton's radio program, *The Answer Show*, from the Strand and Rialto, on-stage fashion shows and talent contests.

From Here to Hollywood

They headed West to Hollywood but their roots were here in Lowell. Among Lowell's legends, Ruth Elizabeth Davis stands out. She was born in 1908 on Chester Street in the home of her maternal grandmother, Eugenia Favor, and became the outspoken, Oscar-winner, Bette Davis.

Olympia Dukakis, another Oscar winner, grew up in Lowell, attended Bartlett School and was honored with her own special Welcome Back Day in 1990.

Wendell Corey, born in Dracut in 1914, was a direct descendant of Lowell mill workers. Others who have gone from here to Hollywood include television host, Ed McMahon and Michael Chiklis (TV's *The Commish*).

Tony-winning stage actress Maryann Plunkett, who has appeared in many television series, is also from Lowell, as is Scott Grimes, who went from the Highland Players to a career in California. Stuntman Robert Tessier, actor Michael Ansara, character actor Karl Lukas and actress Nancy Kelly are other stars with roots in this region.

On Location in Lowell

Today, the Mill City's turn-of-the-century ambience attracts film producers. In 1991, Paramount Studios turned Dana's Market on Gorham Street into the setting for the opening scenes of its well received *School Ties*. Other films shot in Lowell or currently in production include *Saskwatch*, *The Beginning of the End*, and *Lost Eden*.



The Lowell Sun

On the set of *School Ties*, September 19, 1991

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Jim Cook	Martha Norkunas
Joe Corcoran	Robert O'Connor
Albert Courtois	David Perry
Lynne Davies	Charlie Phasoulas
Helene Desjarlais	Nancy Roberts
Dolores Dion	Mary Sampas
Suzanne Dion	William Sarmento
Arlene Dubiel	Peg Shanahan
Jeannette Elliott	Walter Shanahan
Florence Freitas	Ann Shaw
Carole Furlong	Ethel Shofield
Gary Gagnon	Peg Silver
Maria Giglio	Ronald Silver
Pauline Golec	Paul Sullivan
Vera Gold	Cindy Szubzda
Douglas Gomery	Rita Taft
Catherine Goodwin	Charles Tsapatsaris
Al Gregoire	Ada Tuttle
Mitchell Hayes	Heather Tuttle
John Hurtado	John Tuttle
Gretchen Sanders Joy	Wendy Tuttle
Arthur Keenan	Jimmy Wagner
John Kelley	Sam Weisberg
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RESOURCES

- * Assessor's Office, the City of Lowell
- * Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States by Douglas Gomery (University of Wisconsin Press, 1992)
- * The Lowell Sun
- * Recorded and transcribed interviews

THE PATRICK J. MOGAN CULTURAL CENTER

The mission of the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center is to "tell the human story found in the history of the United States as an industrial nation, especially by concentrating on the lives of the working people of Lowell, Massachusetts." The Center, which opened in 1989, is named in honor of Lowell's former Superintendent of Schools who developed the concept of an urban park focused on Lowell's unique heritage.

This former Boott Mills boardinghouse, built around 1837, was rehabilitated by the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission, an agency of the U.S. Department of the Interior. It is an appropriate setting for the Lowell National Historical Park's interpretive exhibits on the theme of the Working People: Mill Girls, Immigrants, and Labor. A wide variety of cultural programs is offered here throughout the year. The Center also houses the University of Massachusetts at Lowell Center for Lowell History, and the University's Downtown Center for Continuing Education.

LOWELL HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

The Lowell Historic Preservation Commission was authorized in 1978 "to tell the human story of the Industrial Revolution in a 19th century setting by encouraging cultural expression in Lowell." Its historic preservation program works to preserve historic buildings and create a recreational trail along Lowell's canals. Its cultural programs interpret the Commission's themes through public art, performing arts, cultural grants, exhibits, conferences, publications, folklife, oral history, ethnic heritage and labor projects. For further information, call (508) 458-7653.

LOWELL OFFICE OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Lowell Office of Cultural Affairs co-sponsors temporary exhibits at the Mogan Cultural Center through its Cooperative Agreement with the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission.

The mission of the Lowell Office of Cultural Affairs (LOCA) is to identify the ways and means to expand cultural opportunities and choices. LOCA manages the Lowell Museum Cultural Fund which provides a financial resource for those who create, present, and preserve the culture of the city through exhibits at the Mogan Cultural Center. For information or to receive The Local, a bi-monthly calendar of Lowell events, call (508) 459-9899.

TEMPORARY EXHIBITS

Any organization, group, or individual interested in developing an exhibit at the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center on its themes, should contact the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission at 222 Merrimack Street, Suite 310, Lowell, MA 01852, (508) 458-7653. A staff member will send you an application and if approved, your proposal will then be recommended to the Mogan Community Advisory Board.